

## **Celebrating the Life of Judge Russell B. Sugarmon Jr.**

Madam Speaker – I rise today to celebrate the life of Russell B. Sugarmon -- a great American jurist, Civil Rights leader, political pioneer and elder statesman from my hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. Judge Sugarmon died Monday after a long illness at the age of 89 but will be remembered forever as a crusading legal scholar who worked to end segregation in the Memphis public schools and for being a political genius who helped behind the scenes to elect the African American and progressive candidates who reshaped Memphis. In 1959, Sugarmon was one of the first African Americans to run for citywide office when he sought to be commissioner for public works. In 1966, he was elected to become Tennessee's second African American state representative since Reconstruction and was later elected a General Sessions Court judge after serving as a partner in the South's first integrated law firm -- Ratner, Sugarmon, Lucas and Willis. Other legendary attorneys such as Bill Caldwell, Irvin Salky, Troy Henderson, Walter Bailey Jr., Russell X. Thompson and Tom Arnold hung their hats and licenses there. From 1976 to 1987, Judge Sugarmon was a referee in the Memphis Juvenile Court system, stepping down in May 1987 when he was appointed a General Sessions Court Judge. He was elected to the bench in 1988 and was reelected in 1990 and 1998. Russell Bertram Sugarmon Jr. graduated from the city's Booker T. Washington High School in 1946 at the age of 15. Sugarmon spent a year at Morehouse College – in the class a year behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – and transferred to Rutgers University, where he received his undergraduate degree in Political Science in 1950. He received his J.D. from Harvard University in 1953 and spent the following two years in the U.S. Army based mainly in Japan. After returning to the United States, he did further graduate studies at Boston University, then came back to Memphis in 1956 to establish a private legal practice. Judge Sugarmon worked tirelessly even when victory wasn't in the cards and kept the faith, knowing that it would come in time. He was one of the most

learned strategists on politics and history in our community, avoiding the limelight but holding sway as the influential wise man behind the scenes in collaboration with a biracial and tolerant group of progressive leaders. Judge Sugarmon was a mentor, supporter and friend of mine my entire life and I am eternally grateful to have been so fortunate to have shared time with this remarkably knowledgeable, judicious and beloved man. Last year, Congress passed and the President signed into law my bill designating the post office at 1325 Autumn Avenue as the Russell B. Sugarmon Post Office. I had hoped Judge Sugarmon would be on hand for its dedication later this year but its existence will stand as a lasting physical monument to his stature in our city, in our state and in our nation. No one is more deserving. Supporting Russell Sugarmon's great work and providing encouragement and strength was the Sugarmon family. Russell was a beloved husband and father of six children, sadly preceded in death by his dear daughter Tina Spence. I extend my sincere condolences to his devoted wife and companion, Gina; his children Judge Tarik Sugarmon, Elena Williams, Erika Sugarmon, Monique Sugarmon and Carol Spence; his extended family and his many friends.